CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS AND MORAL INSTRUCTION
IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

THE OLD TESTAMENT

UNDERSTANDING AND TALKING ABOUT IT

Supporting Document

QUÉBEC

© Gouvernement du Québec
Ministère de l'Éducation, 1999 — 99-0119

ISBN 2 — 550 — 34458-8
Legal Deposit – Bibliothèque nationale du Québec, 1999

Direction de l'enseignement catholique
Christine Cadrin-Pelletier
Associate Deputy Minister for the Catholic Faith

Project Coordinator
Jean-François Giguère
Direction de l'enseignement catholique

Research and Design
Jean Grou, Chief Editor of *Parabola Magazine*
Alain Faucher, Professor of Old Testament Exegesis, Université Laval
Jean-François Giguère, Coordinator of the Catholic Religious and Moral Instruction Program for Elementary School

Text
Jean Grou

Illustrations
André Normand

Coordination of English Version
Konrad Muncs
Direction de l'enseignement catholique

Consultation
Kenneth Elliot

Translation
Direction de la production en langue anglaise
Services à la communauté anglophone
Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1

A Different World 4
1. The Bible : A Collection of Writings 4
2. The "Old" and the "New" Testaments—An Unfortunate Choice of Names 4
3. The Major Divisions of the Old Testament 5
4. Writings that Are Still Vital Today 6
5. Who Wrote the Old Testament? 6
6. The People Behind the Old Testament 7

Different Narratives 12
1. What is a Narrative? 12
2. The Narrative : A Timeless Vehicle 13
3. The Differences Between Biblical Narratives and Contemporary Stories 16
4. Obstacles to An Accurate Reading 18
5. The Oral Tradition : A "Broken Telephone" 19

Biblical Narratives and Historical Truth 19
1. The Bible and Archaeology 19
2. The Bible and Historical Research 20
3. The Historical Basis of Biblical Narratives 21

A Few Questions about the Old Testament 23
1. Did the Events of the Old Testament Really Take Place Exactly as Described? 23
2. What Can We Learn from Texts Originally Intended for People in Former Times? 24
3. Do Biblical Accounts of Creation Contradict Contemporary Science? 32
4. Why Does God Cause People to Die? 33
5. Do Prophets Predict the Future? 35
6. Sources for Further Study 41

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1
A. Events 14
B. The Resulting Narrative 15

Table 2
Genesis 22:1-3 17

Table 3
The Historical Basis of Biblical Narratives 22

Table 4
The Old Testament : Toward a Better Understanding of Jesus 27

Table 5
The New Testament in the Light of the Old Testament 28

Table 6
The Vision of the Covenant in Jesus Christ 31

Table 7
Isaiah 1, A Social Commentator 37

INTRODUCTION

This document is intended mainly for Catholic Religious and Moral Instruction teachers. It can also be highly useful to parents who wish to understand the Bible stories their children are learning at school.

Why Have a Guide to the Old Testament?
With the 1996 Catholic Religious and Moral Instruction Program, elementary school students discover a number of Bible stories taken from the Old Testament. Not everybody is familiar with this collection of ancient writings. Anyone who does not read them on a regular basis, or who does not possess the requisite tools of interpretation, can be overwhelmed by these Biblical passages.

A Complex World
It is easy to lose oneself in a world as complex as that of the Bible, which was written over a period of nearly two thousand years. The Bible is the product of a changing society that we are in danger of not fully appreciating, or of seeing accurately. In popular opinion the Old Testament or the Bible in general are often considered to be :

- forerunners of our former elementary school catechism;
- treatises of dogmatic theology;
- a collection of truths transmitted by God;
- writings imbued with the marvellous and intended for prescientific minds;
- the words of God, as dictated to inspired writers.

We often hear comments such as the following :

« I'm not comfortable with the Old Testament because it comes from a long time ago, and from a culture so different from our own. »

« Since the Bible is the Word of God, it cannot contain any errors. Thus each passage conveys a complete, absolute and definitive truth. »

« I have trouble recognizing the validity of these writings, which have emerged from popular traditions and are always exaggerated. »

« If you tell me that the events related in the bible stories are not historically true, that means that the Bible is lying to us. »

« I don't understand how Old Testament texts can be so violent. We condemn violence on television, yet we say that these stories are edifying. This is all very confusing. »

105-05688/

Doing Justice to the Texts

While the preceding remarks are valid, they do not do justice to the Biblical texts. They do not take sufficient account of important considerations like literary genres, the original sociocultural contexts of the texts and the concept of "covenant." A certain basic knowledge is necessary if Christians are to derive the maximum benefit from the writings in the Holy Scriptures.

Towards a Better Understanding of Biblical Narratives

Various types of texts can be found side by side in the Bible : poems, prayers, legal texts, proverbs and genealogies. This document deals mainly with biblical *narratives*, or stories. It will help you to fully appreciate them by making it possible for you to :

- acquire a few basic concepts with regard to the vast body of writings that goes by the name of the Old Testament;
- gain an understanding of the society from which the Old Testament emerged;
- find answers to the questions most frequently asked about the Old Testament;
- improve your knowledge of the Old Testament through suggested readings.

A Definition of the Bible

The following definition is meant to enable you to find your way in the Bible. It is incomplete and in need of refinement, yet it focuses the mind on essential aspects and sums up the points covered in this document :

The Bible is
a library of ancient books
of very different literary genres
which convey,
often in the form of stories,
the experience of a gradual discovery of God
understood in the context of a covenant with the people of God.
This experience of the Covenant takes places in a society that has its own specific characteristics.
In the Bible, we sometimes find different versions of the same message.
Despite their great age, the Bible texts are meaningful for contemporary believers.
These texts shed light on believers' covenant with God.

Warning : "We're Speaking Generally."

Throughout this work, we will be comparing the society of the Old Testament and our own, in order to illustrate certain explanations. But, since all comparisons are approximate, establishing parallels between our generation and those from the distant past has often resulted in generalizations and oversimplifications. We can, therefore, sometimes give the impression that we perceive our society as monolithic and that we do not pay attention to the important variations observable from one individual to the next.

We are aware of this. In fact, in our desire to be as brief as possible—so that this document does not end up becoming unwieldy—we do not always take the time to qualify our statements.

When we describe the characteristics of contemporary society, we are not thinking of any one group or individual—and certainly not you, the reader! We are merely speaking in general terms.

We also do not want our comparisons to convey the impression that everything was better before. Rather, we simply want to point out the differences among eras while raising a key question : are yesterday's values as relevant as they once were?

Our Intention

It is our wish that this document provide you with an opportunity to develop your interest in narratives from the Old Testament, and from the Bible in general. If you come away feeling more comfortable about approaching these stories in class, then our mission will have been accomplished.

Alain Faucher
Jean-François Giguère
Jean Grou

A Different World

Martin will soon be going on a trip to Indonesia. Before embarking on this adventure, he has browsed through four tourist guides describing the country and read two quite substantial tomes describing its history and culture. Martin knows that, to fully appreciate his trip, he needs to be acquainted with a few basic facts about Indonesian culture, which is very different from his own. In this way, he hopes to avoid any unpleasant surprises and hasty judgments about the people he will meet.

The same holds for the Old Testament. Even if it is extremely popular, this does not mean that everybody can easily make his or her way through it. A minimum degree of preparation is necessary before one can appreciate the full value of these ancient texts and respect them for what they are. Like Martin on the eve of his trip, let's take the time to get to know this very different world.

1. The Bible : A Collection of Writings

It is more accurate to speak of the Bible as a library than as a book, since it is a veritable *collection of writings*. The Christian Bible numbers more than 70 books divided into two major sections.

- The **Old Testament :** The number of books varies according to the translation used :
  The Jerusalem Bible
  46 books : 39 books in Hebrew (with a few sections in Greek and Aramaic); 7 primarily in Greek;
  The *Good News Bible* :
  54 books : 39 in Hebrew (with a few sections in Greek and Aramaic); 15 primarily in Greek.

N.B. : The books in Greek are called the "Deuterocanonical Books." The Jewish and Protestant traditions do not recognize their authority.

The New Testament :
27 books, all written in Greek.

2. The "Old" and "New" Testaments—An Unfortunate Choice of Names

The term "Old Testament" lacks precision. Let us take the word "testament" first. This currently designates an official document outlining one's final wishes. How did a group of writings that has nothing in common with a testament come to be called by this name? The first translators of the Bible worked from a Greek version of the Old Testament, called the *Septuagint*. They translated the Greek word *diathèkè* by the Latin word *testamentum*, which gave us our *testament*. But *diathèkè* also signifies "alliance" or "covenant," two words that are closer in meaning to the original Hebrew. They more strongly suggest the ideas of agreement, undertaking and relationship.

The world "old" is no better. First of all, it introduces the idea of a break or rupture, while the New Testament is the continuation of the "Old." We are forced, therefore, to conceive of the Old Testament as outmoded, out-of-date.

Despite this, however, the writings of the "Old Testament" have lost none of their relevance. For Jews as well as Christians, these are sacred books that they can draw upon for teachings that are always relevant. Moreover, these writings provide Christians with keys to reading, so that they can better understand the mystery of Jesus.

For all of these reasons, when we hear "Old Testament" and "New Testament" we should understand "First Covenant" and "New Covenant." This is not a mere play on words or a way of shedding light on an awkward translation. The same holds for our perception of these writings and our ability to understand the exact context of the Biblical tradition. **From beginning to end, the Bible speaks of God's relationship with His people. This is an indispensable key to reading**.

3. The Major Divisions of the Old Testament

In the Jewish tradition, the books of the Old Testament are divided into three major parts :

- the Torah (the first five books of the Bible);
- the Prophets;
- the other writings (Psalms, historical writings, wisdom literature, etc.).

There is nothing chronological about this classification. The first books are not necessarily older than the last. In fact, the same book often contains sections from different time periods. We have decided to group the books according to use, genre and theme.

- **The Torah**

In English, the word *torah* is usually translated as "law." If we skip through the first five books of the Bible, we will find that they contain much more than legal texts. In Hebrew, *torah* actually means "teaching." The Torah is made up of a diverse set of writings that have emerged from various traditions of the people of Israel. In it, narratives and rules of moral, legal and religious conduct can be found juxtaposed in ways that help to support, explain and justify one another. **In Judaism, these rules constitute the foundation of social and religious life**.

The diversity of the writings included in the Torah is remarkable. Here we find, for example :

- celebrated accounts of the origins of the world, like the story of the creation of Eve from Adam's rib (Genesis 2 :21-23) and the account of the Flood (Genesis 6:1-9, 17);
- stories inspired by the history of the Jewish ancestors, like the episodes of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) and the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 13:17-14, 30);
- less well-known legal texts, like those that provide detailed discussions of the rules of worship (Leviticus 4).

- **The Prophets**

This second set of writings numbers some twenty books. The first six essentially recount the adventures of the Hebrew people during their settlement in the Promised Land (Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings). These are followed by three lengthy books (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel) and twelve shorter writings, each associated with a particular prophet or prophetic tradition. We also find speeches (oracles), poems, specific episodes from the lives of the prophets and historical narratives.

- **The Other Writings**

The third set is, as the name suggests, more diverse. It includes :

- a collection of prayers (Psalms)
- wisdom literature (Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes
- accounts of the return of the Jewish people to the Holy Land after the Babylonian exile (Esdras and Nehemiah);
- and many other texts as well.

- **The Deuterocanonical Books and Apocrypha**

The Catholic Church has accepted into the Holy Scriptures some ten books outside of those recognized in Judaism. These are, for the most part, writings whose original language is not Hebrew but Greek. Judith, Tobit, Maccabees and the Wisdom of Solomon belong to this collection.

4. Writings that Are Still Vital Today

If traditions remain vital from one generation to the next, this is because they enable people to find their bearings. The people of Israel were not content with repeating stories for the sole pleasure of going over the past. Each new generation took from these stories lessons relevant to their world.

In the same way, when we read the history of European settlement in America, we find teachings for today. From a moral point of view, we discover models of courage and solidarity. From a social perspective, we can recognize certain past errors such as in our relationships with Native peoples. But we draw conclusions from all this that will enable us to build harmonious relationships for the future.

5. Who Wrote the Old Testament?

The Bible is a group effort, the work of many authors. **It is generally not possible to determine the authors' identities with any certainty, even when they are mentioned in the text.** Thus the writings in the Book of Isaiah are the work of at least three authors, or even of three "schools" of prophets. When a book of the Bible bears the name of a person, this is not a signature in the modern sense of the word. The name functions more as a guarantee, confirming the validity and authority of the text.

Before it can be included in the Old Testament, a text must satisfy criteria other than the reputation of the author and the text's literary qualities. **A text is recognized as authentic and true when it reflects people's faith**. Collective life influences literary production. The latter constitutes a faithful testimony of a society's identity, of what it has constructed through its faith.

6. The People Behind the Old Testament

The poetry of Gilles Vigneault is "exportable" because it touches on universal themes like love, fidelity, nature, the joy of living, and so forth. But it is also solidly rooted in a specific historic, social and cultural context—to such a degree, in fact, that those familiar with the reality of Québec recognize themselves in it more than anyone else. They relate to the poet because they know the context to which he is referring.

The same holds for the Old Testament, which is the fruit of the literary efforts of an entire people. It offers a reflection of its life and values, of its hopes and aspirations. But we know little about these people. **We are separated from them by thousands of years and great distances, by language, culture and mentality.** Without hoping to fill in all these gaps, we can attempt to draw nearer. Let us take the time to learn about the Jewish society of the Old Testament, about the society of the First Covenant.

- **The Importance of the Collectivity**

While modern Western society attributes great value to the unique character of each person, it is different with the Old Testament. There, **individuals are first and foremost members of a collectivity, of a people**. From birth on, they belong to a group and derive their sense of identity from it.

The second account of Creation in the Book of Genesis illustrates this view of human beings. Soon after creating man, God declared : "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner" (Genesis 2:18). For the Israelites, men and women as God originally intended them are *relational* beings. The ties that bind them form the basis of all human society.

Another example illustrates the importance of the collectivity : "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make **for all peoples** a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines [...]. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast **over all peoples** [...] Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces and the disgrace **of his people**" (Isaiah 25:6-8). The prophet pictures the supreme happiness promised by God as a great banquet that brings together all the peoples of the Earth. We are far from the empty beaches that travel advertising promotes as the ultimate happiness! Far from the kind of *cocooning* that takes place when one's personal space and life become a hermetically sealed bubble!

In short, the Israelites could not conceive of an existence in which human relations were confined to the strictly necessary. This is why an event or situation leading to one's expulsion from a group was considered a very serious

matter, representing a loss of identity. This could happen, for example, if a person contracted an illness considered to be contagious. That person then had to avoid all contact with others and his/her life situation became extremely painful.

- **Respect for Past Generations**

The ancient Hebrews attributed great importance to the experience of preceding generations. Their life expectancy was relatively short, and people had little time in which to acquire personal experience. This is why they continually referred to the teachings of their predecessors. Their wisdom was considered a community treasure.

For the Israelites, belonging to a larger whole was experienced as solidarity among the descendents of one and the same family or ancestor—hence the importance attributed to genealogy in the Bible (see 1 Chronicles 1-9; Matthew 1:1-17). But above and beyond the issue of ancestry, the whole question of heritage comes into play. The long genealogical lists peppered with foreign names underscore the importance of the ancestors, whose actions involved the future and the rights of their descendants. (Pères et Père, *Vocabulaire de la théologie biblique*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1964, column 800) Founding narratives such as those dealing with the promises made to Abraham promote this respect for past generations. Now the Lord said to Abraham, [...] I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing (Genesis 12:1-2).

- **A Society of Poverty**

In contrast to our society of plenty where we can buy almost anything (when we have the means), the people of Israel lived in poverty. Dry soil and scarce water made it hard to obtain goods, and even those essential to survival. Getting something often meant depriving someone else of the same thing.

This explains the spirit in which laws and the rules of conduct developed, **many of which were meant to provide protection for the most disenfranchised**. For example, a woman who lost her husband was not entitled to the inheritance, which passed instead from father to son. However, the woman remained responsible for her children. This situation was often very painful (1 Kings 17:8-15). But, at the same time, the law also provided for a type of tax whose proceeds were intended specifically for widows : Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year and store it within your towns; the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake (Deuteronomy 14:28-29). Thus the current legislation saw to it that the people's means of survival were not put in jeopardy.

Aside from the legal codes, other passages from the Old Testament are more easily understood if we take account of the limited resources that were available at that time. Let's go back to an example already given above, that of the messianic feast in Isaiah 25:6 :

> *"On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear."*

Not very "healthy" all this, at least according to our criteria. The prophet is not expressing his views as a nutritional expert, but as a man who eats meat only a few times a year. The little space available for raising animals limited their production for human consumption. Moreover, quality wines were not daily fare, appearing only on special occasions. **Through these images, the author shares his hope for a joyful and gratifying salvation; he writes about abundance in a society of limited means.**

- **A Less Mobile Society**

When you turn on your television you see images coming to you live from London or Berlin. Or you send a message by Internet to your correspondent in Singapore, who receives it almost immediately. To escape the distortions of the Earth's atmosphere, astronomers observe the stars by means of telescopes orbiting the planet. We already consider such things commonplace.

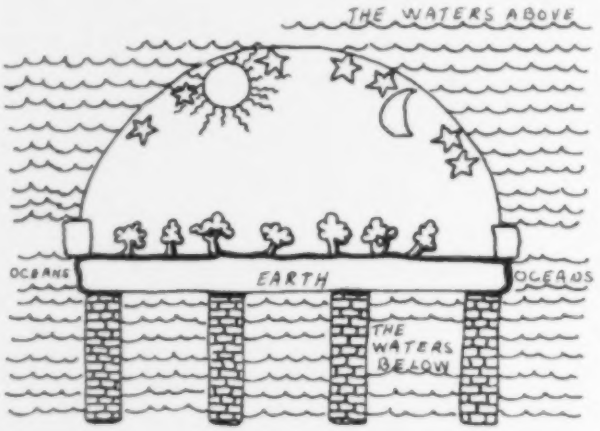
In recent centuries we have extended the range of our senses in a wide variety of ways. Our mastery of wave phenomena, for example, has enabled us to travel without ever leaving our homes. Technology extends our senses and brings us into contact with many people and phenomena that we might otherwise have ignored.

These resources obviously did not exist at the time the Old Testament was written. Human beings learned about the world through their five senses, and had few means of expanding their perception of the world and extending the scope of their words and actions. Communication techniques were not so quick or so far-reaching as they are today. People generally got around on foot, and horses were used rather infrequently. The first large paved roads were built only during the Roman Empire.

The fact that their perception of the world was limited to their five senses had an impact on the ancient Hebrews' way of thinking. Great humanitarian or planetary ideals, such as those we know today, did not tally with their concerns. "Global thinking," environmental issues and the concern with egalitarian international relations were not part of their daily world. This does not mean, however, that the Old Testament has nothing to teach us. Rather, we have to recognize that the ancient Hebrews did not live in the kind of society that gives rise to questions of this nature. Their prime interest was in survival—that of the individual and the group. At times, this concern produced a narrow-minded attitude that may make us uncomfortable.

- **The Picture of the Universe**

At the time the Old Testament was written, human beings believed that the Earth was flat and that it rested on a body of water. The sky was seen as a kind of canvas, with the stars attached. Above the Earth, another body of water was held in place by a force that occasionally relinquished its power, allowing the water to escape through "valves" as rain. As the following illustration shows, everything was in its proper place. Boiling water, which was considered destructive, was contained in a safe place.



The spatial order of the world was complemented by a temporal order. Day followed night as regularly as the seasons. The sun and moon followed a predetermined path that could be predicted through observation. The tides lent the sea a rhythm of its own. Human beings were subject to natural cycles, as we see from certain bodily phenomena such as menstruation.

Everything was in its place. But for how long? A fear remained in the back of people's minds : the return to chaos. What would happen if, tomorrow, a grain of sand slipped into the great mechanism of the universe? Natural phenomena such as storms, earthquakes and floods often threaten the precarious balance of the world. This fear of a return to the great primeval disorder forms the backdrop of many Biblical narratives. The best example of this is undoubtedly the first poem of the Book of Genesis (1:1-5), which shows God at work creating the world. Now God's action does not consist so much in creating out of nothing, but in *establishing order* among the elements :

"And God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.' So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome.

And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good (Genesis 1:6-10).

According to these passages, God wanted a well-ordered world that could be, up to a certain point, predictable and controlled. Sooner or later, however, the elements were unleashed—a sign that the forces of evil, although dominated by God, can sometimes appear to elude divine vigilance.

- **Limits and Borders**

In our society there is a marked tendency to reject prohibitions, discard taboos and extend the limits of human experience. In the name of progress, the virtues of the free market and the globalization of trade have hardened into dogma. Individuals consult their own consciences in moral matters, often in the name of a freedom that amounts to doing exactly what one wants.

The Old Testament reflects a different attitude. The ancient Hebrews attributed great importance to limits, since they lived in the fear of things that might escape their control and precipitate a return to chaos. It is no accident that the Bible opens with a narrative in which the Word of God achieves mastery over primordial chaos.

In the Old Testament great emphasis is placed on defining the limits that the Hebrews had to respect to maintain control over their existences. Numerous laws and regulations specify the differences between the pure and the impure, the sacred and the profane, the permissible and the prohibited. To transgress a prohibition was to break with the Covenant given by the Creator. By acting in this way, human beings placed themselves outside the framework that God gave to human beings to help them attain freedom and holiness. Thus it was important that people be aware of the things that could lead them to such a state, and that they know how to reenter the framework of the Covenant—hence the specific purification rituals. For example, leprosy (a general term standing for various types of skin diseases) made a person impure. Once cured, lepers were expected to appear before a priest who, after a series of rituals, announced that the impurity had been removed.

For the cleansing of the house he shall take two birds, with cedarwood and crimson yarn and hyssop, and shall slaughter one of the birds over fresh water in an earthen vessel, and shall take the cedarwood and the hyssop and the crimson yarn, along with the living bird, and dip them in the blood of the slaughtered bird and the fresh water, and sprinkle the house seven times. Thus he shall cleanse the house with the blood of the bird, and with the fresh water, and with the living bird, and with the fresh water, and with the living bird, and with the cedarwood and hyssop and crimson yarn; and he shall let the living bird go out of the city into the open field; so he shall make atonement for the house, and it shall be clean. (Leviticus 14:49-54)

- **Politics and Religion**

Overall, the Bible's view of human beings is less "compartmentalized" than our own. For, unlike us, the Bible makes no distinction between body and soul (or spirit). Nor does it distinguish between private and public life.

Likewise, among the ancient Hebrews politics and religion were not as clearly separated as they are for us. Rather, both dimensions were interwoven in an organic manner. **Religion was not relegated to the private domain, but permeated every action both large and small.**

Because the people of Israel lived between two rival and hostile powers, their history was turbulent. Egypt lay to the southwest, while to the east was Mesopotamia—home to the successive empires of the Hittites, Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians. To get from one region to another, these peoples had to cross the Holy Land, since the rest of this part of the world was made up mainly of desert. In peacetime, the caravans were a source of income for the Israelites. But when the army of one of these great powers set out to conquer the other, it took the opportunity to subjugate the people in its path. Thus, for better or worse, the Israelites came into regular contact with other peoples, and had to continually defend the territory they claimed for themselves.

In the political and religious thought of Israel, God was the only true king. The earthly king was viewed as God's representative, the visible figure of God for the people. More than a ruler or a symbol of national unity, the king held the real power. The people expected a lot from their rulers, and not everyone was up to the task. Thus we see the emergence of a type of hope called "messianism," which meant that people expected an envoy sent directly by God, a king worthy of the name who would govern on behalf of all and respect the Covenant with God.

Different Narratives

Dominique loves big family gatherings where people laugh, sing and tell stories. Her two oldest uncles are remarkable storytellers. What a treat it is to hear new tales each time! Their youthful escapades include other uncles as well as aunts and various other relatives. Each time, Dominique learns a little more about her family. And about herself as well, for the past of all these fine people is also hers, too...

1. What is a Narrative?

The Bible is the work of a people that wanted to share its experience. That is why it contains mainly narratives, since it represents a very fine way of sharing an experience. When we want to have someone feel something of what we have lived or experienced, we tell stories. When a child tells his parents about an outing organized by his school, he wants to make them feel his happiness or disappointment. When a golfer talks about a particularly good shot he made the day before, he is attempting to have the other experience the joy he feels. Each and every one of us wants to share his or her experience.

A narrative is more than a list of past events. In it, facts are presented in a certain order and with certain emphases that point out the meaning given to them by a person or group. To act in this way is not to betray the facts but to reveal their meaning.

Describing an event is not the same as giving an exact account, like a photograph of what happened; it is rather like recreating this event and showing the meaning that it now has for us. And as we talk about it later, we discover yet other things. For example, a friend may tell us something; we don't pay too much attention, and then later, often a good deal later, we exclain, So that's what he wanted to tell me... How are we going to describe the friend's original statement—in terms or what he told us or in terms of how we now understand it? In other words, are we going to reproduce his exact words or add the meaning that he truly wanted to convey? Étienne CHARPENTIER, *How to Read the Old Testament*, John Bowden trans. (London : SCM Press Ltd., 1986), p. 9.

Given that more importance is attributed to the meaning of Bible stories than to the events that gave rise to them, we sometimes feel uneasy when reading them. We look forward to hearing the words of a methodical historian, a scrupulous biographer or a seasoned journalist. But this is not really what the Bible offers us. Let us consider Biblical narratives in greater depth.

2. The Narrative : A Timeless Vehicle

Narratives have always been made up of the same elements. First something happens and we attribute a *meaning* to it; then this becomes an *experience*. When the time comes to tell about it, we return to the fact through the experience that came out of it. In other words, we do not content ourselves with communicating raw data, but attempt to bring out its meaning. In our way of telling stories, by insisting on certain specific details and organizing information, we lend meaning to lived experience.

The following table illustrates how a narrative works. The first example reflects a recent event, while the second is taken from the Bible.

Table 1

From Events to Narratives

A. Events

Something happens.
We attribute a **meaning** to the **event**, which then becomes an **experience**.

A Current Event	An Event from the Bible
FACTS One winter evening when Philip was driving on an icy highway, he was almost struck by a heavy truck travelling behind him.	**FACTS** Some of the ancient Hebrews settled in Egypt to escape the famine that was sweeping their land. They were happy and prosperous until the day when the Pharaoh made slaves of them. They managed to escape in small groups and made their way back to their own country.
EXPERIENCE AND MEANING Philip becomes aware of the fragility of life. One never knows when it will end.	**EXPERIENCE AND MEANING** The Hebrew people became aware of the fact that God helped them to leave Egypt and to pass from bondage into freedom.

B. The Resulting Narrative

An **experience** becomes the basis for a **meaning**…
by bringing forward several **factual elements**.

A Current Event	An Event from the Bible
Philip relates what happened : "The other evening I was coming back from Montreal on Highway 20. The road was icy. Behind me was a large trailer truck. I figured it was going a bit too fast, considering the road conditions. Since I was going slowly, it quickly came up behind me and started getting into the passing lane. All of a sudden the trailer jackknifed off to the left and the driver lost complete control of his vehicle. I saw it in my rearview mirror. The truck spun around and came within a hair of sweeping me off the road. I had the fright of my life! Since then I have decided to take a trip that I have been putting off each year… We have to make the best of life. Because we never know when we're going to lose it."	Exodus 1 and 15 : "Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labour. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labour. They were ruthless in all the tasks they imposed on them." (Exodus 1:11-14) "I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; […] The Lord is a warrior. […] Pharaoh's chariots and his army he cast into the sea; his picked officers were sunk into the Red Sea." (Exodus 15:1-4)
In his story, Philip emphasizes what helped him to grasp the full meaning of the event : - the size of the truck; - the speed of the two vehicles; - the distance between them.	In this narrative from *Exodus*, the emphasis is on what helps to grasp the full meaning of the event : - the painful character of slavery; - the freedom that came after; - God's presence at the side of the people of Israel, etc.

The events in a narrative are selected and organized in a specific way. A narrative is a structured whole that describes lived experience via factual elements. Thus, in the recent event described above, details such as the size of the truck and the distance between it and the car predominate over other elements such as the colour of the car or the appearance of the driver. To explain the meaning of the experience, the narrative includes an additional element : the day after the incident, Philip made a decision to take a trip he had been putting off for several years.

The same procedure can be found in the Bible story. The events are organized in such a way that the reader can have access to the experience of the ancient Hebrews and grasp its meaning. Emphasis is placed, for example, on certain elements such as the power of Egypt and God's presence at the side of his people.

3. The Differences between Biblical Narratives and Contem-porary Stories

The above comparison reveals the similarities between narratives from the Old Testament and contemporary stories. But the resemblances are limited. At the time the Bible was written, certain storytelling procedures familiar to us did not not yet exist. Novels, newspaper reports, scientific papers, miniseries and film would develop much later. If we approach Bible stories in the same way we would a novel or a newspaper story, we run the risk of being disappointed or thrown off base.

In Chapter 22 of the Book of Genesis, God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, to put him to death. We are surprised to note that Abraham's feelings are never taken into account. Is he saddened? Repulsed? The Bible is silent on this score. The story is told as if by an outsider, by someone content with recounting only what he saw. It may feel unsatisfactory to people such as ourselves, who are used to reading material in which individual psychology and personal feelings play such an important part.

For fun, let us imagine how the beginning of this story would sound if it were written in the popular style of "dime store" novels.

Table 2

***Genesis* 22:1-3**

Original Bible Text	Style of "Dime Store" Novels
"After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.' So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him."	"One brisk fall day God tested Abraham. 'Abraham,' he said, 'take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains. I'll show you the way.' Abraham was dismayed. 'How,' he asked, 'can God, to whom I have been exceedingly faithful, ask me to do such a thing?' With a lump in his throat and sweaty palms, he saddled his donkey and called two of his servants. Then he went into Isaac's room. The boy, as usual, was lying there admiring the flowers he had picked that very morning. When Abraham saw his son engaged in such tender contemplation the tears began to well up in his eyes. Suddenly, he was seized by a feeling of rebelliousness! But Abraham, in his great wisdom, drew on all his strength and managed to contain his emotions. 'My son,' he said, 'we have to go offer a sacrifice in the land of Moriah.' 'Why, Father?' asked Isaac. 'Because God commanded me to. Please don't ask questions, and now go get ready!'"

Unlike miniseries and romance novels, Bible stories do not involve a strong interest in personal psychology. The text of Genesis 22 is meant to acquaint the reader with an experience of wholehearted compliance with God's will. The "secondary" feelings of Abraham and his son are not important.

Some passages in the Old Testament dwell more on feelings and the psychological dimension. Sometimes prayers (Psalms, for example) and meditations from wisdom literature (Job, for example) express distress, joy, revolt, levity, doubt, and so forth. But the Bible generally uses expressions of this type sparingly. When they appear, what they show is not so much character development as the person's relationship with God.

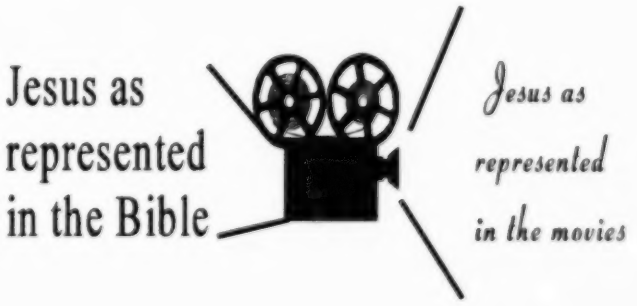
4. Obstacles to An Accurate Reading

Certain TV shows and films influence our way of approaching Bible texts. Writing a screenplay by adhering strictly to what is found in the Bible would probably lead to a very poor film.

Film producers have understood this point. For example, to make *The Ten Commandments* commercially viable, the filmmakers included a love story between Moses and Pharaoh's daughter. **For many viewers, what they see on the screen, not the actual narrative of Exodus, is their main reference point. The images that come to mind are, therefore, not those of the Biblical narrative but those of the big screen.**

How should we approach Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth*, shown on television each year just before Easter? This film comprises the director's choice of elements taken from the four Gospels. By juxtaposing them he does not do justice to the Gospels, for each represents Jesus in its own way. Despite this, the film has become the main source of many people's views of Jesus, to the detriment of the diversity in the New Testament.

In short, various "filters" come between us and the Bible, falsifying the latter. The accompanying drawing illustrates this point.



5. The Oral Tradition : A "Broken Telephone"

Sometimes a substantial amount of time elapses between an event and the account of it in the Old Testament. Even if the Israelites used writing more than all the neighbouring peoples, it still did not extend to the population at large. Many stories first circulated in oral form.

In today's society, which is based so much on writing, the oral tradition has a poor reputation and little credibility. To illustrate its limitations and weaknesses, it is often compared to a "broken telephone," a game in which messages are distorted, abbreviated and sometimes rendered completely incomprehensible. Does this do justice to the oral tradition?

We should not project our limitations on previous generations. Before the invention of the printing press, human beings had few tools that they could use as memory aids. They had to rely instead on their "natural resources." **Thus they developed their listening and memorization skills to a greater degree.**

The oral tradition was one of the few means of transmitting information and knowledge from one generation to the next. There was a tremendous respect for things from the past. The process of oral communication called upon the community as a whole. The great number of people involved guaranteed the validity of the information. Moreover, mnemotechnical procedures helped to preserve older narratives. Various traces of these procedures can still be found in certain texts of the Old Testament.

Biblical Narratives and Historical Truth

Denis reads a news item : "On a high plateau in Iraq, a team of experts has set out to find the remains of Noah's ark." The night before he watched an "Indiana Jones Special" on television. This included two films : Raiders of the Lost Ark *and* The Last Crusade. *The hero of these films braved countless dangers just to get his hands on an archeological treasure. In the first film, he was looking for the Ark of the Covenant that guided the people of Israel through the desert. In the second it was the Holy Grail, the cup that Jesus drank from during the Last Supper. Denis couldn't help thinking : "This fascination with Biblical objects is strange just the same, as if we absolutely haa to see and touch something to appreciate it."*

1. The Bible and Archaeology

Since the stories in the Old Testament sometimes recount marvellous adventures, it is tempting to see them as fairy tales. However, they differ from fairy tales in a number of respects.

Archaeologists help us to make this distinction : they allow us to validate Bible stories by demonstrating their plausibility. **Unlike fairy tales, most Bible stories can be situated in space and time**. Archaeological excavations help us to reconstitute the context of life in the ancient Near East. We know,

therefore, that the Old Testament does not describe an imaginary world but a very real community of people.

Some of the first archaeologists working in Palestine at the turn of the century sought to *prove* the literal truth of the facts reported in the Bible. Sir Charles Marston, for example, obtained funding on the condition that he gear his research toward proof of this kind. The title of one of his books, *The Bible Said the Truth* (1930), is revealing in this respect. Other more recent works also illustrate this tendency.

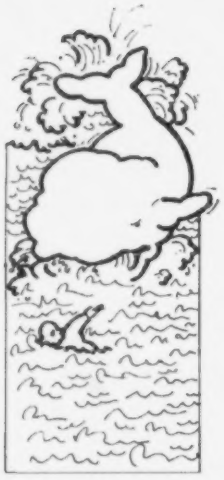
But one has to face the fact that it is generally impossible to find definitive archaeological proof to support Bible stories. While some data may confirm certain narratives, other data either contradict or fail to support them. Archaeologists have concluded that the city of Jericho was probably already destroyed by the time the Hebrews settled in the area. This information seems to contradict the narrative of the Book of Joshua (Chapter 6), which recounts the conquest of this city by the descendents of Israel. But if we look closely at the text we see that the description of the attack is more like a liturgical procession than an advancing army. The text shows that the conquest of the Promised Land was as much religious as military. Factual accuracy is secondary at this point.

While the work of archaeologists is relevant, this is not so primarily because it can provide detailed proof of the facts recounted in the Bible. Often it confirms only the general outlines of a particular story. **But it is valuable because it tells us about the living conditions of the Israelites.** Sometimes it also helps us to better understand a given sociohistorical context, which in turn enables us to shed light on certain obscure passages of the Bible.

The prophet Amos, for example, harangues the court of Samaria : « (…) I will tear down the winter house as well as the summer house; and the houses of ivory shall perish (…) » (Amos 3:15). There has been much discussion about the true meaning of the expression « houses of ivory. » Were these really houses made of ivory? Is this a metaphor? Commentators have also wondered about whom the prophet was really speaking. Archaeologists excavating at the site of Samaria have discovered the foundations of large houses. Among the ruins were tiny ivory plates ostensibly intended to serve as wall decorations. These new data help us to better determine who the prophet's audience was, namely, the people of the well-to-do area of the city.

2. The Bible and Historical Research

Historical research enables us to gain a better understanding of the Bible, primarily by determining the nature of its texts. The aim of the latter was not historical in the sense by which we understand this term today. **Bible texts are not meticulously detailed records of past events.** What is related in the Old Testament sheds light on the present of a people and opens new perspectives for the future.



We must not, however, confuse Biblical narratives with fables. These, like the Bible, give us teachings that are valid for today by describing past events. But, unlike Biblical narratives, they are purely imaginary and present no recognizable context. They could take place just about anywhere, without any significant changes. The same stories circulate, moreover, in various forms throughout the world. The only time indication is the traditional "once upon a time."

Biblical narratives, on the other hand, take place in a context that allow us to situate them in time and space. Let us go back to the example of Jericho. If the conquest of this city did not take place as reported in the book of Joshua, the place still remains real and recognizable.

Legends are often mistakenly confused with fables. Unlike fables, they make it possible to preserve the memory of a people. They have a historical basis that is often made livelier by popular tradition. **Legends help to forge identity in the culture of a people, and it is regrettable that they are sometimes viewed in such a negative light. A number of Biblical narratives, like the story of the Flood or the book of Jonah, are legends. But this does not make them any less valid.**

3. The Historical Basis of Biblical Narratives

It is not always possible to verify the historical basis of Biblical narratives and, when it is possible, research data sometimes contradict what the Bible tells us. So should we attribute value to stories that may not have taken place exactly as described?

In answer to this question, we could make a comparison with today. Like the Bible, modern literature includes narratives whose verifiable historical basis varies in importance. **Table 3** establishes a parallel between several well-known modern narratives and Biblical narratives whose verifiable historical quotient seems comparable.

Table 3

The Historical Basis of Biblical Narratives

Proportion of Historically Verifiable Elements	Modern Narratives	Narratives from the Old Testament	The Meaning of the Narratives
Very low	*The Little Prince* Verifiable element : The author was involved in a plane crash in the desert	The *Book of Jonas* Verifiable element : There is an allusion to a prophet by the name of Jonah elsewhere in the Old Testament (2 Kings 14:25)	Important. Valid for past and present generations.
Low	*Les filles de Caleb* (miniseries) Verifiable elements : The Pronovost family really existed. The descendants of Blanche and Ovila are still living today.	The story of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-25,18) Verifiable elements : In addition to biblical evidence, history and archaeology confirm the plausibility of the character's way of life.	Important. Valid for past and present generations.
High	*René Lévesque* (miniseries) Verifiable elements : Abundant documentation in newspapers and radio and television archives	Solomon the Builder (1 Kings 9:15-19) Verifiable elements : Archaeologists have found the foundations of fortresses built during the reign of Solomon	Important. Valid for past and present generations.

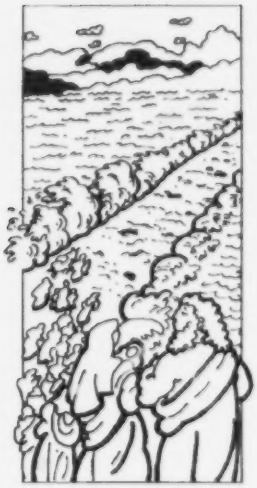
The fourth column of the table, *The Meaning of the Narratives*, is identical throughout. **This demonstrates that the importance and value of the narratives do not depend solely on the extent to which they are historically accurate. Even narratives with very little historical basis *(The Little Prince* and *Jonah*) tell us essential things about life, human nature and God.**

If we rejected Bible texts on the pretext that they may not always describe events exactly as these occurred, we would deprive ourselves of countless treasures.

A Few Questions about the Old Testament

The first three sections of this book provide key information for a balanced approach to the stories of the Old Testament. However, certain frequently asked questions deserve special treatment. It is hoped that the following material will help you to see things more clearly.

1. Did the Events of the Old Testament Really Take Place Exactly as Described?



The preceding pages have already provided some pointers on this subject. We will now broach the matter more directly.

As illustrated in **Table 1**, the authors of the Bible sought first of all to bring out the meaning of events, as opposed to reporting exactly how things happened. They adopted literary procedures very different from those of journalists and historians. They were less concerned with appearing objective than with demonstrating their conviction with respect to the value and pertinence of their message.

One current opinion has it that Biblical narratives exhibit the trappings of romantic literature. In other words, to the thin "crust" of facts was added a thick layer of heroic feats, all-consuming passions, exceptional events and striking phrases—such as we see in certain "historical" TV series. But a close examination of Biblical narratives reveals that they are generally plain and unembellished. Tradition has retained only those portions of the actual events that are meaningful for the group in question. **Instead of adding, biblical literature has a tendency to subtract.** The number of facts related is much smaller than the number that actually occurred. For example, although King Pekah is said to have reigned for twenty years, his reign is given only a few lines (2 Kings 15:27-31).

The authors of the Bible were concise. Not many people could write at that time, and the few who did had little time at their disposal. **Moreover, writing materials (papyrus, parchment, etc.) were costly, fragile and delicate. So one had to keep to essentials and relate only those events that showed whether or not people adhered to the Covenant**.

This said, it sometimes happened that events were reported in ways that seem highly improbable and even somewhat magical. But it would be inaccurate to see these accounts solely as exaggerated. Each element in a text has a reason for being there. The author adopts this approach to expand on the meaning of the event and to shed light on its meaning for future readers.

Thus, historically speaking, it seems highly unlikely that, as Exodus 12:37 has it, 600 000 Hebrews left Egypt under the leadership of Moses. This does not mean that the author is trying to fool or hoodwink his readers. **He retains only what is meaningful from the experience of his ancestors : if the Hebrews went from slavery to freedom, they owe this to God**. And God's actions are never half measures! That is why God offered freedom to more than a half million men, women and children; and why the people of God, from one generation to the next, continue to be offered a freedom that was already nascent in the birth of a nation of slaves subsequently liberated through divine grace.

2. What Can We Learn from Texts Originally Intended for People in Former Times?

The Old Testament : A Mirror of Humanity

« We could say that God made his people live through great hopes and great human experiences. So reading the Old Testament is like reflecting in depth upon our own lives. » (Étienne CHARPENTIER, op. cit., p. 110)

Reading the Old Testament is not so simple as it may first appear. Many of its elements—vocabulary, symbols, social and historical contexts, religious sensibility, etc.—are foreign to our way of thinking. But these obstacles fall away the more we familiarize ourselves with the texts, so that we eventually come to understand the basic human experience underlying the stories. This experience becomes a meeting point, since Biblical narratives speak of men and women as creatures of flesh and blood. The Old Testament speaks of « real » life with all its trials and tribulations, and all the good and the bad that come with it.

Despite its remoteness in time and its differences with respect to customs and values, the Old Testament speaks to our experience today. Here is one example :

[...] the innocent Job who suffers and wants to know why; Koheleth expressing the absurdity of the human condition; the freshness of the love of the betrothed couple in the Song of Songs; the cries of suffering or wonderment in many of the psalms. In all this, it is almost our own life which is being presented to us, as though in a mirror, so that we can reflect on it. However, that is also true of the other texts : our thirst for liberation and our desire to be free men is expressed through the epic of the Exodus or the expectation of the new exodus; the cries of the prophets demanding justice and respect for the poor are added to our social concerns [...] (Étienne CHARPENTIER, op. cit., p. 110)

The past experiences attested to in the Bible possess universal significance. They bridge time and space, speaking to our experience, shedding light on our life and imparting a meaning to it.

- **The Old Testament : Toward a Better Understanding of Christ**

Perhaps you are familiar with the *Asterix* comic book series. You may have already experienced the pleasure to be had from following the ups and downs of the characters, their adventures replete with gags and sudden turnarounds. Even a slight knowledge of European culture and history is enough to double your pleasure, since the stories of Asterix are stuffed with sly allusions that make sense only to those with some knowledge of the culture and history of France and the Roman Empire.

The same is true for Jesus. We can read the Gospels without any knowledge of the Old Testament and still discover an admirable character in the person of Jesus, who impresses us with his words and actions. Jesus is a model of brotherhood and charity. However, a certain familiarity with the texts of the New Covenant deepens our knowledge, **since the New Testament is permeated with the culture and symbolism of the Old Testament**.

While comparison with the *Asterix* comic book series helps us to grasp some of the actual situation, it still leaves something to be desired. In the case of *Asterix*, even if we know nothing about French culture and history, nothing prevents us from understanding the essentials; the sly allusions are used only to enhance or "spice up" the stories. But with the New Testament, the major outlines of the teachings and person of Jesus may elude us if we do not have a basic knowledge of the Old Testament.

Jesus received a religious education fundamentally based on the Old Testament. His life unfolded within the context of God's Covenant with Israel. **Jesus' words and message are a reinterpretation and actualization of the First Covenant. To ignore this is to run the risk of putting words into his mouth.**

In effect, the Old Testament presents the "plan" of what God has promised to carry out, a promise that he renewed and accomplished in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament is the springboard for Christian hope, which is a continuation of the hope inscribed in Judaism. In the New Testament we often find it said that this or that action was performed "*in accordance with the Scriptures*," i.e. the Old Testament. In short, Christ, the Gospels and the Church have their source in, and derive their vocabulary from, the experience of the people of the First Covenant. Jesus shed new light on the past and faith of his people. He gave a new religion to humanity.

The importance of the Old Testament for a deep understanding of Christ is illustrated by the titles that were attributed to him. He was called Messiah, Christ, Son of David, Son of Man, Lord, King, Priest, etc. Most of these titles can be understood only in reference to the Old Testament. We are not dealing with a mere detail, but with the whole question of Jesus' identity. It was through the titles they gave him that the first witnesses of Jesus' words and actions revealed their perception of him. **Table 4** gives us two examples.

- **The Old Testament as a Guide to the New Testament**

If the Old Testament is essential to an understanding of the person of Jesus, in a more general way it is also important for a better understanding of many stories in the New Testament. **Table 5** illustrates how certain developments begun in the Old Testament are realized in the New Testament.

The Old Testament : Toward a Better Understanding of Christ

The Old Testament	Jesus
The title **Messiah** was assigned to any person charged with a specific mission on Earth. Messiahs were generally acknowledged in a ritual that involved anointing the selected person with oil. They were also usually military leaders or kings. Their role was to protect their people from the threats of their enemies and, in some cases, to free them from subjugation. The Bible describes the Messiah as imbued with divine power. (Read 1 Samuel 9:16)	Jesus is called **Messiah** because he was chosen by God for a specific mission, of the same type as that bestowed on the Messiah of the Old Testament : to bring freedom and achieve salvation. (Read Luke 4:18-19)
The King of Israel was the earthly representative of the living God. As such, it was his duty to ensure peace and justice for all his subjects, especially the most vulnerable. In other words, he had to see to it that the terms of the Covenant were respected. Descendants of King David were members of an eternal dynasty, and were entrusted with the divine promises. The expression **Son of David** was synonymous with King. The prophets, on the other hand, were disappointed with the kings and looked forward to the day when God himself would reign directly over his people. (Read Samuel 7:15-16 and Isaiah 52 :7)	Jesus is the **Son of David** because, in him, the idea of kingship is crystallized : he is God's perfect presence in the world, guaranteeing peace and justice to whoever agrees to follow him. With Jesus there was, however, a break with the expectations traditionally associated with his title. He rules over a Realm that is very real, although *of a different order* than that of the kings of Israel. It is a Realm in the process of becoming, the one dreamt of by the Old Testament prophets. (Read John 18:33-36)

Table 5

The New Testament in the Light of the Old Testament

The New Testament : Jesus in the Desert *Unlike the children of Israel in the desert, Jesus overcame the temptation to renounce God.*	**The Old Testament : Israel in the Desert**
Matthew 4:2-4 : "He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was **famished**. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, "It is written, ***One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes by the mouth of God***. " *Matthew* 4:6-7 : "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, *He will command his angels concerning you* and *On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone*." "Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, ***Do not put the Lord your God to the test.***' "	Exodus 16:2-3 : "The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. […] 'For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with **hunger**.' " Deuteronomy 8:3 : "[…] **One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord**." Exodus 17:3-7 : "[…] The people complained against Moses and said, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?' He [Moses] called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and **tested** the Lord." Deuteronomy 6:16 : "**Do not put the Lord your God to the test […]**."

Matthew 4:8-10	Exodus 32:7-8
The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will **fall down and worship me**.'	Your people [...] have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have **worshipped** it [...]. Deuteronomy 6:13 (The author warns his people, newly settled in the Promised Land, that they must not let themselves be seduced by the gods of the conquered people.) **The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve [...].**
Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, **Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only**.'	

The Star of the Saviour *Unlike Herod, the unworthy sovereign who was an accomplice of the Roman emperor, Jesus was the true king hoped for by the prophets.*	**The Star of the King**
Matthew 2:1-2 : After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?' For we **observed its star** at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.	Numbers 24:15-17 : The oracle of Balaam [...]. I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near—**a star shall come** out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the borderlands of Moab and the territory of all the Shethites. (Note : In the ancient Middle East, the appearance of a new star announced the arrival of an important figure on Earth.)

- **The First Covenant and the New Covenant**

Knowledge of the Old Testament is just as necessary for an accurate perception of the originality represented by the Covenant in Jesus. Note, first of all, that "new Covenant" is not to be understood as "another" or "different" covenant. Christianity developed within the context of the first Covenant. The basic purpose of the Covenant was the sanctification of life and the reestablishment of the relationships with God that are being continually violated by human beings.

Christ has, so to speak, *renewed* the Covenant, shed a different light on it. He has given it a new beginning, a second wind. By virtue of this fact, the new Covenant in Jesus implies both rupture and continuity with respect to the Covenant described in the Old Testament.

We should be wary of clichés and generalizations that depict the First Covenant as essentially ritualistic, legalistic and caught in a frozen tradition. This impression stems from a superficial reading of two types of texts in the New Testament :

- passages from the Gospels in which Jesus criticized certain scribes and Pharisees for an attitude that undermined the liberating effect of the Law;
- passages from the Letters of the Apostles (especially Paul) that insist on the incapacity of the Law, as interpreted by some religious leaders.

These writings should be placed in their original context. The Jewish community restricted access to synagogues to the second or third generation of Christians. For a number of believers who came from the tradition of Judaism, this difficult experience of rejection led to doubts about the need to adhere to the Christian faith. Some of them were even tempted to leave the nascent Church in a bid for the security of a familiar religious practice. This is why the authors of the New Testament emphasized the limitations and constraints of Judaism. In this way they sought to bring out the advantages and benefits of faith in Jesus Christ.

Also note that the New Covenant does not in itself constitute an "invention" on the part of Jesus. Already, in the Old Testament—particularly among the prophets—the idea of a change in the covenant relationship begins to be apparent. However, the expression "New Covenant" appears in only one passage.

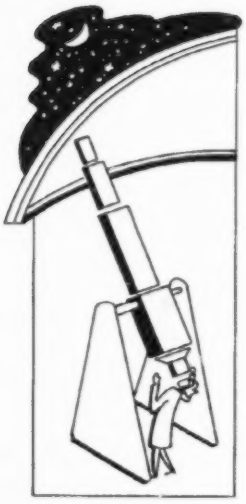
> *"The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt" (Jeremiah 31:31-32).*

For Christians, Jesus Christ will accomplish the renewal hoped for by the prophets. The main aspects of this renewal are indicated in **Table 6**

Table 6

The Vision of the Covenant in Jesus Christ

The First Covenant	The New Covenant
This was asymmetrical and unilateral. God was the Wholly Other, the Most Holy, inaccessible and transcendent. All figurative representation or illustrations of God were impossible.	Christ makes his equality with God *accessible*. He opens the way to the holiness of God. Having taken the human condition upon himself, God offers humanity an image of himself in Jesus.
Birth was the determining factor in settling the question of whether one belonged to the people of God. This was made up by the descendents of the sons of Israel.	Through Jesus all people have access to the people of God by means of their faith. By following Christ, they share in his condition as the Son of God. They become, in spiritual terms, sons or daughters of Abraham.
The relationship with God is mediated through a network that includes the Law, worship, religious vocations, the Sabbath and religious holidays.	The relationship with God is experienced as part of the relationship that unites Jesus with his Father. Christians share in this filial relationship, which has Christ as its sole mediator. The priesthood, the sacraments and ordination are not the ultimate forms of mediation with God. They are merely the signs of the real presence of Christ in the world, in Spirit and in Truth.
God chose a specific place to live : Jerusalem. The Temple was his house, and the Ark of the Covenant his throne. That is why Jews, when they find themselves without a temple, keep their eyes turned in the direction of the Holy City.	Christ is present on Earth through his Spirit. Even if Christians honor certain sites, they do not consider any one site to be the residence of God.



3. Do Biblical Accounts of Creation Contradict Contemporary Science?

- **The Bible and Science : Two Different Discourses**

A brilliant observer once made the following remark : "The Bible teaches falsehoods! Look at the account of Creation. God is said to have created the grass before the sun (Genesis 1:11 and 14). Now everybody knows that plants need sunlight to grow." This person was contesting the value of Biblical narratives. But this argument has a basic flaw in that it applies contemporary scientific criteria to a poetic text composed according to different rules.

But—all appearances to the contrary—Biblical narratives do not contradict contemporary science. Science and the Bible do not deal with the same questions. While the former is primarily interested in the *how* of things, the latter is more interested in the *why*. **Science is mainly concerned with explaining facts, while the Bible attempts to supply a meaning for them.**

Moreover, if the Bible were meant to describe exactly the origins of the universe, why would it give us, one after the other, two different accounts of the Creation? (Genesis 1:1-2,4A and Genesis 2:4b-24) These two accounts do not even agree on the manner in which the events occurred!

- **What Value Should We Attribute to Biblical Texts Dealing with the Creation of the World?**

After the preceding clarification, let us be more precise about the value to be ascribed to Biblical accounts of creation. Biblical authors, like everybody else, asked themselves existential questions such as : "Where do we come from? Where are we going? Where does life come from? Where does the universe come from? Why are we here?" The authors of the two texts of the Book of Genesis—a poem (1:1-2, 4a) and a story (2:4b-35)—give their thoughts on these matters. They cannot claim to have the last word on the origins of the world, since they cannot call upon any eyewitnesses to the events. Their observations of the world serve as a point of departure for reflections on nature, the sea, stars, animals, life, death, relations between men and women, and between God and the children of God.

The authors of the Bible do not propose a version of the theory of the origin and evolution of the universe. **They are more interested in the respective positions of God and human beings in the world, and in the conditions that must be met to prevent a return to the original chaos**. Thus, according to the first account of Creation, the order and (relative) harmony of the world are the result of the grace of God. **God did not create anything out of nothing; *God established order in the universe***. It is God who keeps the waters in their place and who ensures that the stars appear in the sky with their characteristic regularity. In the second account, God entrusted man with the care of the Earth, telling him that he must not seek to acquire divine power. God also presented him with woman, who is his equal and life partner and whom he is enjoined to respect. In the first account, in addition to entrusting man with the care of the Earth, God also invented the Sabbath as a day of rest. In this way, God's creature would not end up becoming a slave. God wanted to maintain a healthy balance between work and rest.

In an attempt to gain a clearer understanding of the accounts of Creation, let us look to a song by Francis Cabrel. His song, *Sitting on the Edge of the World*,* expresses a certain measure of truth. Does the fact that it has not been subjected to the tests of history or science take away any of its value? Is not the poet entitled to portray God's sadness before the trials and tribulations of this world?

"If my memory serves me well,"
Said God from high upon a cloud,
"I had a story once I longed to tell.
I began it on a planet that was new
And different from the others—it was blue."
He sat out on the edge and saw unfurled
What human beings had made of their new world.

The city slowed to a quiet hum.
The rivers seemed about to overflow.
The children were worried, wanted to know
Where all the new noises were coming from.
"It must be God," said the parents, "from on high.
For what he sees only makes him cry."

(Adapted from CABREL'S *Assis sur le rebord du monde*, from his CD, Samedi soir sur la terre, CHAN-4-801, 1994)

The procedure is similar with Biblical narratives, which make ready use of poetic and vivid language. **The value of Biblical narratives resides not in the accuracy of the facts described, but in what they have to tell us about God, life and human beings**.

4. Why Does God Cause People to Die?

- **Two Types of Narratives**

We must first of all distinguish between two types of narratives :

- those in which God threatens to destroy human beings, but actually refrains from doing so;
- those in which God actually does destroy human beings.

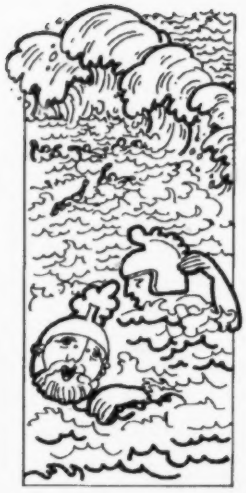
Most Biblical narratives fit into the first category. In most cases, the threats are directed to the people of Israel. To grasp the importance of these threats, we must place them within the context of the First Covenant.

- **What Exactly Does "Covenant" Mean?**

Ancient literature supplies several examples of "treaties of alliance," which constituted a type of agreement between two peoples. In this arrangement, the stronger of two parties agrees to defend the weaker against its enemies, provided that the latter respects the conditions of the agreement. This generally involves the payment of a tribute, which is a sort of tax. Should the weaker party fail to comply with the conditions of the agreement, it forfeits the

protection of the other. At that point anything is possible, even the destruction of the unprotected party.

The people of Israel drew upon this model to characterize the bond they enjoyed with their God. If we managed to escape from Egypt, they said, and were able to resist this superpower—whose Pharaoh claims to be God—this is because we were not alone. We enjoyed the protection of a much stronger power that can only be God. To characterize this relationship with God, the Hebrews quite naturally chose the most well-known model of political agreement, namely, the alliance treaty or covenant.



This covenant with God comprised a number of clauses. As with political agreements between peoples, failure to comply with one or the other of these clauses could have far-reaching consequences. **Israel understood its covenant relationship with God in the light of the treaties of alliance concluded between different peoples**. It interpreted the divine will somewhat as if God were saying to them : "I took you out of Egypt and gave you freedom. Now, I am giving you rules you can use to make the most of this freedom, to help you truly live it. But if you do whatever you wish, then anything can happen." This is the tone found in the threatening words that are attributed to God in the Old Testament. This is a normal reflex in alliance treaties.

- **All's Fair in Love and War**

But what happens when God acts upon these threats? When God causes human beings to die, can we accept this without flinching? The account of the *Exodus*, for example, seems very cruel : God "struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock" (12:29). Is this the God who Jesus Christ called "Father," the tender and merciful eternal God.

Here again we can grasp the scope of the narratives when we place them within the context of the Covenant. **God's role consists in *protecting* Israel. God must intervene on its behalf in order to respect the terms of an agreement—that which consists in making God's people the firstborn among the nations** and the ultimate beneficiary of the blessing bestowed on Abraham. God complies with his part of the contract by exterminating Israel's enemies. **If God did not respect his agreement, he would not be a true God and, as a result, would not be worthy of his people's confidence.**

We must also take into account the literary genre of epic tales and military exploits so common in Antiquity. These texts proclaim the glory of kings and recount their victories at the head of their armies. **When the authors of the Bible wanted to show how Israel survived a particular danger, they drew upon this tradition**. God, having made a Covenant with his people, procured victory for it by crushing its enemies—as one might expect from any king worthy of the title. The ancient Hebrews had no doubt that God was far more powerful than any earthly monarch. How else can we explain the fact that a group of unarmed Bedouins managed to escape from a place as powerful as Egypt? The Bible authors felt called upon to cast Israel's military exploits in

a much grander light than those of the neighbouring peoples. And they did not hesitate to employ details that illustrated the disarray of foreign powers.

- **Changing Perceptions**

Human beings did not learn everything about God all at once. Indeed, they are still learning about God today. Although the Bible is the key witness in this search, it is not the last word. It brings together texts that believers recognize as transmitting an authentic experience of faith. By looking at these texts as a whole, in all their tension and equilibrium, we can come to a clearer understanding of the living God. Suppose, for example, that you are in a museum, standing close to the *Wedding Feast* of Bruegel the Elder. From this distance you see only the ruddy face of a Flemish figure from the sixteenth century. To truly appreciate the scene, you have to back up and look at the picture as a whole. As you do so, you see a joyful rustic scene that you would really like to be part of. **Thus it is important to look at the whole picture given in the Bible, and not to get too taken up with any one specific image of God from any particular culture or period**.

The Bible uses various images to talk of God. To express themselves, its authors choose their words as precisely as possible. God is often described as having human characteristics, a process known as *anthropomorphism*. If we hold to *only one* of these images, treating it as complete, exclusive and unchanging, we do not do justice to the Biblical texts. It is also important to consider the developments that they relate.

Thus the view of God held by the people of Israel changes with the political landscape. The image of God as warrior corresponds to a time when various leaders were fighting over territory. The Roman Empire instituted a period of relative stability, and confrontations between the great foreign powers came to a halt. In this new context, the image of God as a conquering king was no longer as relevant. New images were in order.

5. Do Prophets Predict the Future?

No! At least not in the way we mean this today. **Prophets do not have a gift that would enable them to predict upcoming events. They are neither futurologists nor fortunetellers**.

Prophets speak, of course, of the future, but by "reading" the present. They look at what is going on around them and try to understand it in the light of the Covenant. They could be described as "Covenant commentators." They look at a given situation—their society, for example, and the way in which it experiences its relationship with God. They evaluate what happens with reference to the key precept of the Covenant : respect God and your neighbour. They foresee the consequences if certain situations continue, and call for change.

The discourse of the prophets does not necessarily include all these elements in this order. In the first chapter of the Book of Isaiah, however, one can pick out the four parts normally found in Biblical commentary.

Isaiah 1, A Social Commentator

Situation :
People worship on a regular basis but…

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. (Verse 11)	This passage refers to sacrifices such as burnt offerings and animal blood presented at the altar—in short, everything that contemporary opinion deemed necessary to please the Lord. But the prophet is making the point that something is not right.

Evaluation :
The Covenant is not respected, violence reigns

Your hands are full of blood. (Verse 15)	The blood the prophet is alluding to is that of the sacrifices of his fellow citizens, whom his government did not protect. Respect for one's neighbour and respect for the Covenant go hand in hand. Disregard for law and justice lead to a break with the Covenant, a fact that seemed to have been forgotten by the representatives of the authorities.

Possible consequence :
The population is headed toward disaster

But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword! (Verse 20)	Can a people unable to achieve peace and harmony survive? Can the king rally the people to forestall an impending invasion? Or would he run the risk of turning his sword against himself?

Solution :
Law and justice must be reestablished

Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (Verse 16)	The offering of sacrifices does not secure social harmony or divine protection. The key resides in respect for the Covenant : treat the weak justly and ensure that justice reigns.

- **The Prophets Spoke in the Present Tense**

The prophets were not time travellers. They rarely risked assigning specific dates for the accomplishment of their prophecies. On the contrary, the latter were often introduced by very subtle formulas that gave little weight to the real time frame of events. Examples of such formulas are : "In those days..." and "The day will come..." Jean-Pierre PRÉVOST, *Pour lire les prophètes* (Ottawa/Paris : Éditions du Cerf, 1995), p. 15.

But what do we make of the "visions" announced by some of the prophets? These projections into the future were primarily literary procedures attesting to an acute awareness of a vocation, of a turning point in the life of a character.

> *The word of the Lord came to me a second time, saying, "Jeremiah, what do you see?" And I said, "I see a boiling pot, tilted away from the north." Then the Lord said to me : Out of the north disaster shall break out on all the inhabitants of the land. For now I am calling all the tribes of the kingdom of the north, says the Lord; and they shall come and all of them shall set their thrones at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its surrounding walls and against all the cities of Judah. And I will utter my judgments against them, for all their wickedness in forsaking me; they have made offerings to other gods, and worshiped the works of their own hands.* ***But you, gird up your loins; stand up and tell them everything that I command you. Do not break down before them, or I will break you before them. And I for my part have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land.*** (Jeremiah 1:13-18)

Jeremiah's prime intention is to shock his listeners into an awareness of the threat from the north, i.e. Babylon. He describes his special relationship with God in vivid language. He wants to convince his audience that he is an envoy, a spokesman of the Lord. We do not have to deny the reality of the prophets' mystical experience; but neither do we have to reduce them to the status of visionaries in the throes of uncontrollable ecstasies.

- **Two Types of Prophetic Speech**

For a better understanding of the prophets' way of speaking, we must distinguish between two different types of prophetic speech :

- redictions of adversity in times of happiness and plenty;
- redictions of happiness in times of adversity.

- **Woe Unto You!**

In periods of peace and prosperity, the Israelites were not always attentive to the rise of new problems. Instead, they told themselves, "Everything's just fine! We live in a peaceful country, we have a good king." It was at times like this that the prophets rose up to announce the hardships to come. In essence, all they were saying was, "Wake up! Present events have future consequences. Your decisions and your behaviour go against the ways that the Lord gave us

to help us live in freedom, peace and harmony. **Table 7** illustrates this type of speech.

The prophets made political pronouncements because the Covenant had a direct influence on the organization of social life. Whenever the king had to make a decision, a prophet would remind him of his duties as a person responsible for the well-being of his people. Any king who turned a deaf ear exposed himself and his people to danger.

The prophets also addressed themselves to the general population, since its members also had responsibilities within the context of the Covenant. For example, in cases where large segments of the population were unjustly treated, liturgical practices sometimes became a way for the more fortunate to maintain a clear conscience. The prophets took them to task for this (see **Table 7**). The same attitude can still be found today. We must all be familiar with statements like, "Them? They go to church every Sunday, but that doesn't stop them from getting mixed up in shady deals!"

- **Good Tidings!**

The people of Israel experienced their share of trials and tribulations. In such circumstances, the prophets announced the coming of better days, and in doing so recalled the terms of the Covenant. God, they pointed out, had made a commitment to them and would keep to it. The worst thing that could happen would be for the people to give in to discouragement. Despair and fatalism threatened the unity and cohesion that were key to its survival.

When misfortune did strike, the prophets enjoined the people to seek their happiness in things other than what they had just lost. The Babylonian exile (circa 600 B.C.E.) was the worst trial ever experienced by the people of Israel, but it also taught them that they could have a relationship with God in places other than the Promised Land. Formal worship was impossible since the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, the only place authorized for ritual sacrifices. The prophets restored morale by reminding the Jews that the Lord remained by their side. And, despite appearances, they continued to maintain the relationship they had already established with God. The prophet Ezekiel expressed this conviction in vivid language in Chapter 11, verses 22 to 25. There he describes God leaving the Temple in Jerusalem to join the people of Israel in Babylon.

Ezekiel, along with other prophets of the period, continued to foster a new type of relationship with God. The spiritual dimension began to become more important than material concerns. This was the context that gave rise to the first synagogues. Since they could no longer come together around ritual sacrifices, the Jewish people built synagogues as places where they could nourish their souls through the Word of God, i.e. the Torah. The synagogues were not "houses of God"—the Jerusalem Temple maintained this status even after its destruction— but places where the Torah could be proclaimed, places of teaching and prayer.

- **To Sum Up**

The prophets' mission was, first and foremost, to spark awareness, to prevent "circular thinking." They opened people's minds to dimensions beyond the factual and overturned received ideas, appearing wherever people tried to hide behind banalities or magical thinking. In times of difficulty, they fought against fatalism and despair by reminding the people that, despite appearances, God had not abandoned them. In prosperous times, they harangued the well-off, calling them back to their responsibilities vis-à-vis the most disadvantaged. In short, they became barriers against the kinds of excesses that might otherwise have led their people to its destruction.

The provocative and troubling tone of prophetic speech helps to explain why tradition has preserved it. Because it casts life in a different light and calls on men and women to stand up for what they believe, it has assumed a value for succeeding generations.

6. Sources for Further Study

Since this document does not include all the material readers may need to become totally comfortable with the Old Testament, the authors have decided to supplement it with the following list of works. They can be found in specialized bookstores and various libraries.

Collective. Bible 2000, Strasbourg, Signe, 1997. (Text of the *Jerusalem Bible* in encyclopaedic form with comments, reflections and teachings).

Collective. *Une première approche de la Bible avec Pierre Vivantes*, Cahiers Évangile collection, no. 35. Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1981.

Charpentier, Étienne. *How to Read the Old Testament*, John Bowden trans. (London : SCM Press Ltd., 1986).

D'Aragon, Jean-Louis. *Notre Bible : Comment nous est-elle parvenue?* Toronto/Montreal, Société biblique canadienne, 1994.

Damien, Noël. *Les origines d'Israël*. Cahiers Évangile collection, no. 99. Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1997.

Delhez, Charles. *Apprendre à lire la Bible*. Kinshasa, Éditions Saint-Paul Afrique, 1990, p. 7-119.

La Diffusion Catéchistique-Lyon. *Racontez-nous l'Ancien Testament*. Bourges, Tardy, 1976.

Gilbert, Pierre. *L'Ancien Testament*, Parcours collection. Paris/Montreal, Centurion/Paulines.

Hari, Albert and Charles Singer. *Découvrir l'Ancien Testament aujourd'hui*. Strasbourg, Signe, 1994.

Monloubou, Louis. *L'Ancien Testament : Porte de l'Évangile*, Croire et comprendre collection. Le Centurion, 1974, p. 15-30.

Prévost, Jean-Pierre. *Pour lire les prophètes*. Ottawa/Paris, Novalis/Éditions du Cerf, 1995.

Sevin, Marc. *La Bible dit-elle la vérité?* Les Carnets Fête et Saisons collection, no. 16. Paris, Éditions du Cerf.

Verracchia, Jean-Claude. *La Bible mode d'emploi*. Dammarie-lès-Lys/Villiers-le-Bel, Vie et Santé/Société biblique française, 1995.

Vogels, Walter. Abraham et sa légende. Montréal/Paris, Médiaspaul/Éditions du Cerf, 1996.

Vogels, Walter. *Nos origines*. Ottawa/Novalis, 1992.

Gouvernement du Québec
Ministère
de l'Éducation

32-2613A